



uncorked

By ED SOON

Scallywag, anyone?

Our columnist enjoys good ol' tasty Scottish tipples at Douglas Laing & Co Ltd.



Fred Laing of Douglas Laing Whisky Bottler Glasgow, in the Sampling Room.



Whisky – love it or hate it. For many first-timers, its first feel in the mouth can be disconcerting. It is, after all, pungent, warm with a high alcohol content.

But what is whisky? Essentially, it's distilled fermented grain mash of barley or rye that is aged in wooden casks. Whisky from Scotland is also known as scotch, after its place of origin, Scotland. Fine whisky is best appreciated neat, or at most, with a splash of water. First, the whisky is inhaled, then sipped and swallowed. The highlight is savouring the liquid slowly, appreciating its aromas of leather or smoke, spice and/or vanilla caramel and more. Then, recognising the length of its finish.

Never to be rushed, appreciating whisky is about enjoying the moment. Such a moment was to be had when I interviewed Fred Douglas Laing of Douglas Laing & Co Ltd. Seated in tanned leather-backed armchairs, with plenty of whiskies to taste, I had to remind myself this was actually "work".

"My father started the business in 1948," shared the affable moustached Scotsman, clad in a kilt, in an accent reminiscent of Sean Connery's.

Today, Douglas Laing & Co Ltd. is a third generation family-run independent bottler based in Glasgow. The company does not produce whisky but buys premium whisky in casks (mature or young) from various distilleries (including those owned by the big brands), and later, sells it under the company's own brand. "Call us bottlers and blenders," Fred said.

How has whisky drinking evolved over time, I enquired?

"Over the years I've collected 10, 20, 30, 40 and 50-year-old whisky barrels. In the 70s and 80s, we sold a lot of 30-year-old whisky but then came the difficult times. Suddenly, whisky drinkers were less interested in aged whisky. But out of hard times came something good.

"To innovate, we decided to offer single cask whisky for sale. This turned out to be something special that appealed instantly to the whisky connoisseur. After all, the expression of each cask is different and unique – as opposed to a whisky blended from several casks (even if the whisky was a single malt). It's as close as you get

to drinking a dram straight out the barrel in a distillery warehouse," laughed Fred.

"Enjoy these whiskies – some are almost as old as we are," he added, with a twinkle in his eye. And we sure did! Here are my tasting notes.

Douglas Laing Provenance Range of Single Malts

The Provenance range of whiskies come from all over Scotland and from various distillers, including Ardmore and Glen Ord from the Highlands, Bowmore and Laphroaig on Islay, Auchentoshan in the Lowland, Glen Grant and Tamdhu from Speyside, and more. Each bottle is identified by the distillery name.

● **Alt A'Bhainne, 12 Years, Single Cask** – Sweet with spice and nuts and very well balanced.

● **Inchgower, 12 Years, Single Cask** – Mocha, cinnamon and cardamom. Developed hay and fruity butterscotch flavours in the glass after an hour.

● **Benrinnes, 18 Years, Single Cask Grain** – Balanced and smooth with roasted corn and sesame overtones.

Douglas Laing Specialist Range (Clan Denny, Double Barrel, etc.)

Within the specialist range, the Clan Denny whiskies are unique. This signifies small batch "vatted malts"/malts blended together (usually Speyside or Islay) or aged single grain whisky. The Port Dundas is from a distillery closed several years ago; the Invergordon 45 years is an aged grain whisky. There is also the Clan Denny blend of Islay Malts that I did not taste. However, I did get to taste the other specialist whiskies – the Scallywag (vatted Speyside, made from blending casks from Mortlach, Macallan and Glenrothes), the Double Barrel (blend of two distillery malts) and Big Peat (blend of whisky from Ardbeg, Caol Ila, Bowmore and the now closed, Port Ellen).

● **Clan Denny, Port Dundas, 21 Years Single Grain** – With an elegant character, this whisky had vanilla, corn and caramel overtones although compared to the other whiskies, it tasted quite neutral. After an hour, a lovely aroma of starched linen emerged.

● **Scallywag, Malt, Speyside** – Redolent of raisins, stewed fruit, dark chocolate, vanilla, chocolate and more. Delightfully sweet. I enjoyed this with Mouhalabieh, a creamy milk pudding and fresh fruit compote.

● **Big Peat, Malt, Islay** – Seaweed, soot, disinfectant and charred meat with overtones of salt and ashes. Will appeal to those that love the strong taste of peat! This is the whisky to accompany lamb kebabs!

● **Double Barrel, Malt, Ledaig & Bowmore** – This certainly combined the best of both worlds; there was the maritime ozone aromas from the Ledaig and the smoky fruitiness of the Bowmore. I enjoyed the complex taste of red peppers in this whisky and it certainly paired well with a tandoori dish that was served up. Other double barrel versions of whisky include that of Ardbeg with Glenrothes, Coal Ila and Tamdhu.

Douglas Laing Old Particular Range

Old Particular bottlings are from only one cask, without colouring or chill filtration – essentially whisky straight from its cask, highlighting even the differences in each stave used in the cask. Old Particulars are bottled at cask strength. Old Particular whiskies span the range of distilleries – from Jura and Glen Scotia to Bowmore, Blandnoch and Macduff.

● **Old Particular Single Cask Malt, Teaninich 30 years** – Heady and intense aromas of florals, with a hint of stewed fruit. Complex with overtones of bamboo pith and medicine cabinet.

● **Old Particular Single Cask Malt, Glencadam 35 years** – Red fruit, plums, orange, cocoa and orange flavours. Also water biscuits, water chestnuts and sesame seeds. Warm finish.